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Q&A: Soviets still holding Americans, ex-prisoner says

John H. Noble on Americans held prisoner by the Soviets in slave labor camps.

John H. Noble, a U.S. citizen, was trapped in Germany during World War II. In 1945 he was arrested by the Soviets and deported to Siberian slave labor camps, where he survived nearly 10 years of brutality and hardship. He was released from captivity only after President Eisenhower personally intervened.

Mr. Noble is involved in an effort to extract State Department documentation on remaining U.S. citizens still being held prisoner in Soviet labor camps. He estimates that as many as 250 Americans may still be alive in these camps — an assertion the Soviets never have conceded. Mr. Noble was interviewed by Washington Times assistant managing editor Ted Agres.

Q: How did you come to be imprisoned by the Soviet Union?

A: I was born and raised in Detroit. My father had made investments overseas in Europe. I went over to study in one of my father's plants and was interned by the Germans during World War II. At war's end I was arrested by the Soviets, who took me to East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, into the Soviet Union and up into the Arctic where I spent most of my time in the slave labor camp known as Vorkuta.

Q: How did you get out?

A: For eight years the State Department sent notes to the Soviet government asking about my whereabouts. The Soviets answered, "We do not have John Noble. We never heard of the man." But I managed to smuggle out a postcard as evidence that I was still there. It took a long time but reached distant relatives in West Germany. I couldn't put my name on the card but I covered it up by calling them aunt and uncle and had greetings from "your noble nephew" — noble with a small "n."

That was the clue. The word "noble" has the same meaning in German as in Russian. These relatives had no idea who the card was from. They knew I was in captivity somewhere, but they did not know anyone else. They kept stumbling

over that awkward expression, then sent the card to Detroit to my parents. My parents recognized my handwriting. This served as evidence that I was still there and still alive. The State Department began to send notes to the Soviet government, photocopies of the card, stating that, based on the evidence, I'm still alive and still there, and I must be released. The Soviets never answered the notes. Rep. Bentley was working on my case, and would go to the State Department, urging them to send another note. Then he would go to the news media and report that the State Department was sending another note, so State would have to send another note. Eight notes were sent. No answer from the Soviets.

He took the card out of the hands of the State Department and went to President Eisenhower and gave him the card. Then he went to the news media and said the president is personally intervening on John Noble's behalf. So the president had to intervene on my behalf. That's when changes started taking place. Because at that point, the Soviets had to say to themselves, "Well, how much damage can he do if we let him go, or is better that we take a black eye and keep him here."

I was reconditioned at Potma, a camp 325 miles southeast of Moscow. They let my hair grow again, because up in the Arctic we were shaved and completely bald. They gave us better clothing and food. There were two other Americans there, William Marshuk from Norristown, Pa., and William Berdine from Starks, Ind. They treated us very kindly there — they were conditioning us for possible release. I brought my weight up to 116 pounds.

In early 1955, I was shipped to Berlin, where I was turned over to American authorities. After a thorough investigation or examination by the CIA, I was flown to Washington and had lunch with the Foreign Relations Committee in the House of Representatives. I answered questions for maybe an hour and a half. Then I was taken to Navy intelligence, and questioned about the downed American flyers. But the records of the questions and answers at the Foreign Relations Committee and at Navy intelligence are no longer there. Nobody has them. Nobody can find them. Why I don't know. There's just there's no record of it anywhere.

Q: How many Americans do you think still might be alive in the Soviet Union today?

A: In Berlin, I tried to sum up all the names that I had heard and the reports that I heard. Granted there might have been overlapping, but my answer was probably somewhere around 3,000. When I came back, I discovered the State Department had released the figure of 5,000. In the meantime, we've gotten figures of approximately 4,000.

I believe that probably the 4,000 figure is most accurate, as of about 1955, 1956. In one camp, for example, when I came out there were 325 Americans. About 10 years ago there were about 16 left alive in that camp. Now the others may have been transferred out. But if you take that ratio, then you would have that there are probably 200, 250 still alive.

I believe it is our obligation to demand all Americans back. If not, give us proof or remains of those that are still there.